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## ROMAN IMPERIALISM<sup>1</sup>

THE aim of this paper is merely to touch lightly upon a few of the more important problems of the imperial government and administration, beginning with Julius Caesar. For comparisons between Roman and modern, particularly British, imperialism, those who are interested should consult the writings on this subject of the scholarly statesmen Bryce and Cromer.

The most illuminating fact that has come to me in recent years is that the imperial organization and administration were inherited more from the Hellenistic kingdoms than from the Republic. Hellenistic conditions found in Sicily, Macedonia, the Seleucid realm, and Egypt were perpetuated with little modification and extended in a varying degree to the remaining parts of the Empire. In other words it is a fact that the Greeks, whose political achievements we have been accustomed to belittle, created a great and essential part of the imperial fabric. In the central administration, as well as in the localities, their influence was largely determinative. In spite of endless discussion the aims of Julius Caesar have remained a riddle. The solution here offered, which seems to me to account better than any other for his actions, is that he considered himself a successor to Alexander the Great. This character appears clearly in the prospective conqueror of the Parthian realm, who would have made the great bulk of the Empire Oriental, and have reduced the portion west of the Adriatic to an insignificant, and perhaps temporary, appendage. The form of state and government toward which he was visibly, and perhaps deliberately, moving was the Hellenistic, which obliterated nationality and the sentiment of patriotism, substituting for them business principles in the dealings of the absolute monarch with his high officials, and imposing upon the masses with his pretense of divinity.

Caesar's assassination was but a part of the inevitable failure of this scheme. Its collapse was due mainly to the impossibility of creating a Hellenistic officialdom of such material as could then be found in and about Rome. Octavian, his heir, early discovered the mistake and, to correct it, reverted at once to the republican idea of an empire governed by the Italian nationality. Religion, literature,

<sup>1</sup> [See note 1 on p. 755. The untimely death of Professor Botsford has deprived the paper of the benefit of any possible revision on his part. Ed.]

art, legislation, and all other possible means were resorted to for creating the moral and patriotic spirit necessary for the task. The legionaries who protected the Empire were to be Roman citizens; and the high military and civil officials were to be drawn from the republican aristocracy. But the Italian nationality was too decadent, and the high society of the capital too ease-loving, dissipated, and demoralized to assure the complete success of the plan. It was certainly due to his effort, maintained by his faithful follower Tiberius, that through all the vicissitudes of the centuries to come there survived the one precious feeling that the state was a commonwealth—*Res Publica*—the inalienable possession of every freeman in the Roman world. Claudius was the first to break with the Augustan national policy. This lopsided eccentric creature was the greatest creative statesman between Augustus and Hadrian. It was not so much himself as his Greek freedmen who in his name abandoned the Augustan tradition and set up a movement definitely in a Hellenistic direction. This policy included (1) the beginning of a great civil service which enabled the government gradually to assume many new functions, and (2) the rapid political assimilation of the provincials to Rome. His successors continued the policy till the goal was finally reached by Diocletian. The late Empire was thoroughly Hellenistic in its administrative machinery and oppressive taxes, in its denationalized population and the substitution of monarch-worship for genuine patriotism.

The motives to the building up of the Empire, as set forth some time ago in this association, were various, but among the most powerful was the predatory interest, the plundering of subject countries of their wealth and their treasures of art. From the conquest the administration inherited its predatory motive. Governors plundered; Verres, less an exception than a type, would scarcely have been known had it not been for Cicero. The tax-gatherers extorted more than their due. Under the protection of Rome swarms of usurers spread over the provinces like hungry leeches, to suck the blood of the innocent. Exceptional was the just governor like the elder Cato, or the humanitarian governor like Cicero.

Those portions only, as the Nearer Orient, which produced luxuries for the Roman market, and received rich compensation for their tribute, in an unending shower of gold and silver, profited by the Empire, felt a keen interest in the prosperity of the City, and bewailed aloud her burning in the principate of Nero.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Revelation xviii. 11-19.

11. And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her, for no man buyeth their merchandise any more,

12. The merchandise of gold and silver and precious stones and of pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet and all sweet wood and all manner vessels of ivory and all manner vessels of most precious wood and of brass and iron and marble,

13. And cinnamon and odours and ointments and frankincense, and wine and oil and fine flour and wheat and beasts and sheep and horses and chariots and slaves and souls of men.

14. And the fruits that thy soul lusted after are departed from thee and all things which were dainty and goodly are departed from thee, and thou shalt find them no more at all.

15. The merchants of these things which were made rich by her, shall stand afar off for the fear of her torment, weeping and wailing,

16. And saying, Alas, alas, that great city, that was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls!

17. For in one hour so great riches is come to naught; and every shipmaster, and all the company in ships, and sailors, and as many as trade by sea, stood afar off,

18. And cried when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, What city is like unto this great city!

19. And they cast dust on their heads and cried, weeping and wailing, saying, Alas, alas, that great city, wherein were made rich all that had ships in the sea, by reason of her costliness! for in one hour is she made desolate.

Little of the wealth extracted from the subject countries ever returned by way of imperial improvements. The provinces were the estates of the Roman people—*praedia*, which the school-boy happily translated *prey*. The benefits of protection and peace were largely counterbalanced by the desolating civil wars which raged for many years of the later Republic over the greater part of the Empire.

The principles changed this policy to one of improvement. It was a more prudent, a longer-headed, selfishness, from which developed a benevolent paternalism. In the words of Tiberius: "A shepherd shears his sheep but does not flay them." The shepherd sympathizes with his fellow-creatures. Many a princeps was more appreciated by his provincial subjects than by the historian at Rome; and in fact those who are canonically listed as vicious were often best-willed toward the provincials. Such was Nero, whose accession was announced in Egypt in the following terms:<sup>3</sup>

The Caesar who had to pay his debt to his ancestors, god manifest, has joined them, and the expectation and hope of the world has been declared autocrator, the good genius of the world and source of all good things, Nero, has been declared Caesar. Therefore ought we all,

<sup>3</sup> *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, VII., no. 1021.

wearing garlands and with sacrifices of oxen, to give thanks to all the gods.

The first year of the autocrator Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, the 21st of the month Neos Sebastos. [A.D. 54.]

In his principate the provincial concilia through honoring or accusing their governors were exercising a growing influence at Rome. And he in part fulfilled the promise through his attention to removing the abuses of tax-farming and through the increased power of the provincial concilia at Rome.

Hadrian and the Antonines were "fathers" of their people. But it was a long way between the princeps at Rome and the peasants of Asia Minor in Syria or Egypt. Few of those who were subject to extortion and violence at the hands of local dynasts, travelling soldiers, or imperial officers and agents, dared lift up their voices in prayer to the divine imperator at Rome, and few perhaps of the written petitions ever reached him; but the reply to every prayer received, no matter what the character of the princeps, whether a Hadrian or a Caracalla or Philip the ex-bandit, was one assuring rescue, including a command to the local authorities to investigate and redress. Little came of these assurances, however, for the princeps was at the mercy of the administrative machine; and the problem of giving justice to the subjects failed.

The sum of all imperial problems was the protection of the world's civilization from external enemies and internal decay. The decline of ancient civilization signifies that the problem was too great or the capability of Rome too limited for the task. Many are the causes of decline alleged by the moderns; and far too often the investigator or the thinker has displayed an inordinate jealousy in behalf of his own contribution to the list. "You are all wrong", each one exclaims, "my horse is the only genuine hobby"; and soon the junk-yard is filled with mutually broken "one and onlies". It is reasonable, however, that, as many forms contributed to the up-building of civilization, so too its decline must have been due to the co-operation of various disintegrating movements. All the alleged causes may in a varying degree be true, only let their claims be less intolerant and exclusive. Here two or three of the more prominent suggestions may be considered.

Exhaustion of the soil: Undoubtedly this holds true of vast areas throughout the Empire. But the ancient agriculturists understood well the means of keeping up the soil, and were acquainted even with artificial fertilizers. While acting as a disintegrating force, soil-exhaustion was the result of a deeper cause, of a material force or psychological condition, which led farmers to neglect the up-keep of their holdings.

The degradation of the *coloni* to the condition of serfs: This was perhaps the most characteristic symptom of the decline. It undoubtedly served as a cause but just as surely it demands explanation; for certainly the emperors did not for their own pleasure reduce rural laborers *en masse* to serfdom, but were driven to it by hard necessity. The colonate, quite as much as soil-exhaustion, proceeded from a more fundamental source.

One of the more fundamental causes was urbanization deliberately pursued by the imperial administration as its most effective means of assimilating and of governing subject populations. The natives were attracted to the city by its beauties and pleasures, its theatres, gladiatorial shows, and wine-shops. In this way the fields were robbed of their cultivators and the city population, in lack of sufficient industries for their profitable employment, became a host of parasites, a dead weight upon the creative and sustaining energies of the Empire.

Lack of industry is an even more telling fact. The ancients had a few simple mechanical devices, such as sails for their ships, horse-power for grinding some of their grain, and the water-mill, which they were more inclined to disuse than to develop. In contrast with present conditions, however, we can say that the inhabitants of the Roman world were machineless, that everything required had to be done by hand with the aid of domestic animals. What this meant for the Empire can only be appreciated by imagining what the United States would be, or necessarily become, if we Americans were reduced to the machineless condition of the ancient world.

For the maintenance of the military force, the expensive administrative system, and the hosts of semi-parasites, for the building and repair of fortifications and roads, and of the splendid structures in all the cities, a proportionally greater demand was made upon the laborers than had been necessary in the petty states of earlier time. Our first intimate acquaintance with the Roman world shows us that the Empire was not wealthy and prosperous, but poor; and the more we study the society and economy of the localities, the more the evidence accumulates before our eyes.

Augustus certainly could have raised a sufficient number of troops, with the concomitant supplies, for the conquest of Germany to the Elbe—no serious student of Roman history ever doubted that; but in the end, if not from the beginning, he concluded that, in the units of value with which he reckoned, it would not pay. A vast expenditure of lives and money in such an object ran contrary to his policy of devoting all possible resources to the repair of dam-

ages caused by the devastating civil wars. The conquest of Britain was little or no economic gain to the Empire;<sup>4</sup> the Danubian provinces and other vast areas cost more to govern and protect than they were economically worth.

As everything had to be done by hand, with the aid of work-animals, the margin between production and consumption even in prosperous seasons was extremely narrow. Agriculture was the principal source of gain; and we can see the imperial procurators painfully striving to increase the area of productive lands, as the province of Africa in the time of Vespasian and his immediate successors. This is a leading object of the *Lex Manciana* drawn up by order of the princeps, probably Vespasian. Such measures seem to have succeeded in increasing the productivity of the Empire, but only for a time. The height of prosperity on the imperial domains of Africa was evidently reached shortly after Vespasian, but it was soon passed and the decline had set in before Hadrian; for the chief concern of the *Lex Hadriana* is not so much the reclaiming of waste lands as of lands once cultivated but abandoned. There are reasons for believing that the change for the worse which took place in Africa about A. D. 100 was typical for a large part of the Empire.

The desertion of farms, however, was no novel phenomenon. It was active in Sicily under the late Republic, and the cause was not soil-exhaustion but the extortions of the governor Verres and his gang of leeches. Under the principate and Empire the desertions continued. They were due in part to the attractions of the cities or of the free bandit life of mountain or border. We know too that in many instances they were caused by oppression. The predatory motive of the administration survived from the Republic, and attained to a new vigor with the development of a complicated machinery of government. Where Bryce says, that the peasants of the Empire were "exempt from all exactions, save those of the tax-gatherer",<sup>5</sup> he is far from the facts. Lacking adequate compensation for expenses, travelling soldiers and officials quartered themselves on the inhabitants along their various ways, and levied upon men and work-animals for the transportation of their goods. These burdens were the more galling as they were capriciously levied, and as the helpless peasants were exposed in the process to all manner of illegal extortion and brutal violence. Behind this omnipresent grinding was not only the inherent greed of bureaucrats, but with the diminishing productivity of the Empire an ever-growing need of money and supplies, a hunger that never could be satisfied.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Appian, Preface, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Bryce, *Studies in History and Jurisprudence*, p. 20.

The condition above described was intensified by depopulation due to the ravages of pestilence, to the great mortality of cities under imperfect sanitation, and the existence of conditions in city and country which discouraged marriage and the rearing of families.

Possibly with greater intelligence something might have been devised to lessen the fundamental evil; but the most deplorable accompaniment and cause of decline was steady, irresistible dwindling of knowledge and mentality. In pre-Roman times the Greek republics and local dynasts, whether tyrants or kings, encouraged art, literature, and science to such an extent that the civilized world was thickly dotted over with intellectual centres. The Roman conquest destroyed the greater part of this intellectual life, for example at Tarentum, Syracuse, and Pergamum; and the Roman administration repressed and discouraged the little that survived. In the absence of an extensive reading public authorship cannot thrive without the patronage of the wealthy. The imperial government refused patronage to local talent and, after Augustus, gave little aid to the promotion of literature and intelligence in the capital. The founding of an occasional library, or the endowment of a chair of rhetoric, was a poor substitute for the whole-souled co-operation formerly given by the Republic. Imperial negligence was attended and reinforced by an almost Egyptian-like conservatism, an adoration of the wisdom of past ages, so that authors almost ceased to collect new facts by observation but limited themselves substantially to the study of old books. Short-cuts to knowledge became the vogue. Compendia of science and epitomes of historians made the originals unnecessary, so that they were not perpetuated. From the very beginning of Roman rule many who were inclined by nature and taste to a literary or intellectual career devoted themselves instead to money-making. The Empire therefore lacked the knowledge and the intellectual power necessary for the solving of its problems. A machine like the water-mill, instead of developing, was disused. Skilled work became crude and finally barbarous; and in proportion to the increase of ignorance and barbarism the products of the Empire declined in both quantity and quality.

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